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ABSTRACT

The issue of the expansion of international interaction and cultural stereotypes, and their effect on the levels of communicative competence and the willingness to participate in international cooperation is addressed. One specific form of national stereotype, the reflected autostereotype, is described. An examination of reflected autostereotyping is made using the Finnish society and its overall relationship with Swedish society as an example of how cultural stereotyping, usually showing up in national languages, inhibits effective communication and stifles cooperation and coexistence. Some study results are revealed that indicate that Finns, because of their anticipation of negative outcomes from communications with foreigners, avoid such contacts. Other evidence points to a general weakness of the Finnish ego that would explain their stereotypes. The overall problems of Finnish intercultural skills, their perception of the self and their stereotypic prejudices against foreign cultures, are seen as not easily solvable. Behavior and attitude change are seen as key, but there is no established methodology to date that would appear to be effective enough or not burdened with many problems in implementation. (GLR)

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# THE ROLE OF NATIONAL STEREOTYPES IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

According to the classical theory of attribution people tend to assign causes to important instances, especially events of success and failure in the social world. In addition it is supposed that these attributions also have important consequences for their feelings and behavior.

This holds true in intercultural contacts as well. How we perceive other person's motives and intentions and how we adapt our own behaviour to these perceptions determines whether the contact results in failure or success.



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In initial interaction with strangers, stereotypes play a vital role: they determine the characteristics of the strangers' personality and their expected attitudes and serve as a kind of zero-hypothesis for our attributions. The less we know the more we cling to the stereotypes.

Fig. 1 illustrates the vicious circle of cultural stereotypes and communication: stereotypes and other cognitive structures serve as hypotheses for the interpretation of communicative events. If one presumes that the other's attitude is hostile he is apt to interpret his behavior accordingly.

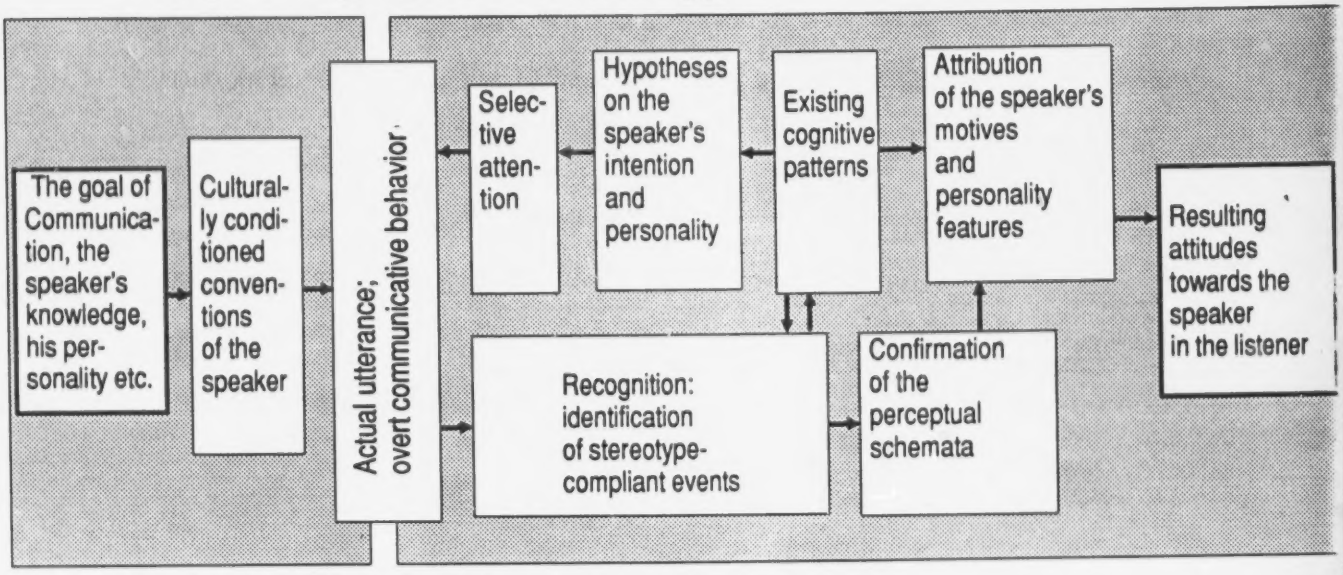
The goal of Communication, the speaker's knowledge, his personality etc.
Culturally conditioned conventions of the speaker
Actual utterance; overt communicative behavior
Selective attention
Hypotheses on the speaker's intention and personality
Existing cognitive patterns
Attribution of the speaker's motives and personality features
Resulting attitudes towards the speaker in the listener
Recognition: identification of stereotype-compliant events
Confirmation of the perceptual schemata

Fig. 1. A model of attributions in intercultural communication

Guo-Ming Chen (1989) defines intercultural communication competence as consisting of personal attributes, communication skills, psychological adaptation and cultural awareness. The cultural stereotypes discussed in this paper affect all these levels of communication competence. An attempt is made to describe one specific form of national stereotype which will be called the reflected autostereotype.

Expansion of international interaction has not levelled down the national characteristics or national languages of the European countries. On the contrary, national self-consciousness and the appreciation of national languages has gained more strength. This adds to the tension between two international practices in com-

munication: one concerning using English, the lingua franca of the modern world, the other, the favouring of various national languages.

The language used in inter-Nordic events has been 'Scandinavian' comprising varieties of Swedish, Norwegian and Danish. For the majority of Finns, however, Nordic meetings and negotiations are problematic because only 5 per cent of the Finns speak Swedish, a Scandinavian language, as their mother tongue, but all of them (similar throughout Scandinavia) learn English at school. In this situation, factors such as cultural attitudes, national stereotypes, and actual experiences of communication failure or success may have a dramatic effect on willingness to participate in international cooperation. The reserved attitudes of Finns towards the Scandinavian languages and cultures were clearly seen in a poll made recently by Finnish Gallup according to which Swedes were found among the five least preferred nationalities with which young Finns would like to get acqvainted (Helsingin Sanomat 1990).

Contacts between Finnish-speaking Finns and Swedish culture on one hand and the increasing Finnish-Estonian contacts on the other offer an interesting field of study for researchers because it has been supposed that the cultures are respectively similar if not identical. It seems, however, that there are differences in the underlying value systems in each culture, which are reflected in the attributions people make when seeking reasons for their perceptions.

It will be suggested that a negative reflected autostereotype is typical of the Finnish intercultural attitude. It seems to be one of the emotional factors which makes the Finns' intercultural interactions more difficult in general but especially within Scandinavia. It will be further hypothesized, that the reflection of the negative autostereotype, or negative perception of self in the assumed heterostereotype of the foreigners is a kind of ego protection strategy. The same function has the custom, typical of Finns, to explain to the stranger his own behavior during the initial interaction.

In one of the preliminary tests a group of 30 Finnish FL teachers and 26 philology students (future FL teachers) were asked to describe by means of three adjectives

(1) themselves
(2) the assumed attitude of the Swedes toward the Finns
(3) the assumed self-perception of the Swedes, and
(4) the Finns' perception of the Swedes.

The Finns described themselves with 137 adjectives, 68 of which were positive and 48 negative. The most frequent words were straightforward (reilu), headstrong (sisukas), hardworking (ahkera) and reliable (luotettava); the most frequent negative characteristics were: shy (ujo), reticent (sulkeutunut), envious (kateellinen) and blunt (juro).

The Finns described citizens of their neighbouring country with 54 adjectives, of which 45 were negative: according to the Finns the Swedes are among other things supercilious (ylpeä) and egocentric (omahyväinen).

Among the answers to the question "What do you think the Swedes think about themselves" typical adjectives were: smart (fiksu), tolerant (suvaitsevainen), intelligent (älykäs), cosmopolitan (maailmankansalainen) and representative of 'better people'.

When the Finns were asked "What do you think the Swedes think about the Finns" the result was 45 adjectives, most of which were negative. The most frequent were: stupid (tyhmä), slow (of comprehension), backward (takapajuinen), drinker and regular fighter!

The answers of the Swedes in a similar test did not show any uniform 'national self-portrait': the adjectives which the Swedes used to describe their national characteristics reflected more personal attitudes than any uniform autostereotype. The Swedes' descriptions of Finns differ from the Finns' autostereotype and especially from the Finns' reflected autostereotype (i.e. how do the Finns believe

the Swedes think about them): according to the Swedes, the Finns are 'very much like us', 'not different from us', 'friendly' and 'industrious' although 'silent', 'shy' and 'melancholy'.

Although the Finnish data was only about the Swedes' assumed prejudices against Finns the recent public discussion about the international image of Finland and about the goals of the image marketing campaigns, suggests that the Finns' prejudice about the outer world's negative attitude towards Finns concerns all the 'important others' i.e. cultures and nationalities the opinions of which are important for Finns. The Finns' expectations are incorrect and irrational at least from two points of view: (1) The idea that people all over the world had some specific image of the Finns is a narcissistic one: In reality most foreigners know very little about Finland and have even fewer stereotypical expectations about the Finns' special characteristics. They usually form their impressions about a person and his culture on the basis of their actual behavior in the contact situation - or on the basis of the stereotypes the Finn voluntarily offers to him during the initial interaction (more than one of the foreigners that I interviewed told me that they had never fixed their attention on some of the features in the behavior or in the personality of their Finnish communication partner if the Finn had not explained as a kind of excuse his national weakness at the very beginning of the interaction!) (2) Empirical data clearly contradicts the Finns' pessimistic prejudices.

The data collected by Rusanen (1990) in the French headquarters of international companies in Paris offers us as an example of the actual image of a Finn.
In one of her tests the employees of the office were asked to freely describe their colleagues representing different nationalities with three adjectives. The six most frequent adjectives were:

| Americans | Frenchmen | Germans | Finns |
|---|---|---|---|
| friendly | talkative | effective | friendly |
| open | selfish | logical | quiet |
| dominating | spontaneous | formal | timid |
| self-confident | colourful | rigid | prudent |
| casual | friendly | dull | calm |
| effective | self-confident | selfish | reliable |

This data clearly contradicts the Finns alleged social image. The findings of Yli-Renko (1989: 32) are in accordance with Rusanen's data. According to her study besed on c.a. 100 questionnaires answered by the Finns' U.S., Canadian and British business partners "Finns do not lack empathy, enthusiasm or friendliness in intercultural communication. They seem to have an honest and sincere desire to communicate succesfully across cultural boundaries".

In our earlier studies on the Finns' cross-cultural communication skills we came to the conclusion that one of their problems is irrational anxiety associated with the anticipation of negative outcomes of expected communications with foreigners which may result in active avoidance of such contacts. This tendency, FL communication anxiety, might derive from the Finns' negative self-esteem associated with high cultural consciousness (see: Lehtonen, Sajavaara & Manninen 1985).

Data presented by Åke Daun, a Swedish ethnologist, give support to the hypothesis of the ego-weakness of Finns as an explanation of their stereotypes. Daun (1989) writes: "The self-confidence of the Finns is poorer that of the Swedes, although a deficient self-confidence is characteristic for both groups". In Daun's questionnaire there was a question "Can you be subject to humiliation and ridicule without letting it affect your self-confidence and self-concept?" Of the Swedish males 56 % were able to do this, of the Finnish only 23 %. Also the following question in Daun's study was indicative: "Do you always make a point of trying to find out what other people think of you?" Of the Finns 18 % answered 'yes', of the Swedes only 9 %.

The present data also reflect a phenomenon, well-known in Scandinavia, which Daun calls 'storsveskhet' (the Swedish superiority). Daun writes: "In Finland and in Norway people have a tendency to see the Swedes as conceiving themselves to be more democratic than other nations". (Daun 1989:39)

The preliminary analysis of the data seems to suggest, that the negative autostereotypes and negative attitudes towards foreign cultures are strongest in the monolingual inland and among those who have had few international contacts; those who have more every day intercultural contacts and have a good knowledge of the neighbouring culture (e.g. the group of native Finns who work as teachers in Sweden) exhibit a less uniform and less negative autostereotype than e.g. the group of foreign language teachers in Finland!

* * *

Nancy Adler (1986:57ff) refers to research data which suggests, that people maintain their stereotypes even in the face of contrasting evidence. Instead of questioning, modifying or disregarding the stereotypes a person alters his perceptions of reality to fit the stereotype. Because cultural stereotypes are in most cases subconscious they also represent for him a part of 'objective reality'.

The fact that we see what we expect and what we want to see makes cultural stereotypes self-fulfilling prophecies: if we expect the other person to be hostile, supercilious, distant and cold we are also more sensitive to perceiving such cues which give support to our expectations. At the same time, we tend to ignore such information which contradicts our expectations.

People from different cultures perceive and organize their environment and give meaning to it in different ways. Therefore, people from different cultures do not always make isomorphic attributions of the same event. As Nancy Adler puts it, I use my meanings to make sense out of your reality (Adler 1986:61). But the case is made even more complex by the reflected autostereotypes: I use my

meanings to make sense of your reality, but in addition I make suppositions of your perception of the reality, which is false in my opinion.

What makes this interpretation fatal in the cross-cultural context is the fact that cross-cultural misinterpretations are most often subconscious: We are generally not aware of the characteristics of our own culture which work as a yardstick in our attributions. At the same time we assume that the other part assumes, imagines and perceives in the same way as ourselves - psychologists call this phenomenon 'projected similarity'.

It is paradoxical that the negative self image is especially strong among foreign language and mother tongue teachers. For the most part they are also responsible for the dissemination of the autostereotypes.

When the teachers state that the Finns do not master small talk, which is important for social relationships, that their pronunciation of any foreign language is ridiculous, that they have no manners and cannot behave because of the youth and backwardness of their own culture, if compared to any other culture, they do it in good faith. They want to motivate people to learn languages, cultures and the assumed good manners. Some of them may even believe in what they say although most of it is not true or is based on wrong generalizations.

Normally stereotypes are irrationally based, negative attitudes fowards foreign cultures, or some ethnic groups and their members, which are biased towards noticing the negative characteristics of the target group and ignoring the positive ones. The negative perception of the self seem to turn the scales upside down: one is sensitive to perceiving the negative cues in the surroundings and overlooks the signals for cooperation. Kati Laine-Sveiby, an ethnologist, suggests that one of the typical features of the Finnish culture (if compared to the Swedes) is the high level of cultural consciousness which results in uncertainty and insecurity in cross-cultural encounters (Laine-Sveiby 1987).

The final question is, of course, what should be done in order to improve the Finns' intercultural skills, their perception of the self and their stereotypic prejudices against foreign cultures. According to Hannigan (1990) factors relevant for the training of successful cross-cultural functioning comprise skills, attitudinal factors, and personality traits. Among these the first two, intercultural skills and attitudes toward self and others, can be affected by training. This question is also theoretically interesting. A commonly held opinion is that attitudes must change before behavior. However, Pettigrew and his colleagues (1982), for instance, refer to social psychological research data, which suggests that the opposite order of events is more common: behavior changes first - because of some interventions - and individuals then modify their ideas to fit their new acts.

But the question of training intercultural competence is still more problematic because we not only lack knowledge and experience of effective teaching methods, we may also lack full understanding of the fundamental goals of intercultural education (cf Casmir & Asuncion-Lande 1989:302).

One approach which might help to develop positive intercultural sensitivity might be the "education of attention" the goal of which is to sensitize the students to relevant information in the adaptation of the situation in target culture. (cf. Bond & Forgas 1984) But even in this approach the crucial point will be the perception of self, and how to improve it nationwide.

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